

New Normal by ohmybgosh

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Summary:

Max thinks Billy is a mouth-breather. Billy has the worst case of heart eyes. Steve's just here for the free cookies.

New Normal

Author's Note:

Anon prompt from my tumblr: "are you taking harringrove prompts? cause if you are, i can't stop thinking about how cute it would be if max caught them making out or something and billy starts freaking out cause he thinks shes gonna bash them for being together, but shes like 'nah steves cool, don't hurt him tho' and she totally already knew they were together cause damn billy has the worst case of heart eyes"

Thank you!! Loved this prompt so much I wrote a whole one-shot whoops. Head over to my tumblr, always taking prompts!

Max hates Billy; but it's less and less everyday. Ever since the Incident (that incident, The Incident with a capital "I") Billy's been better. Quieter, less of a mouth-breather. That's Max's new favorite word: mouth-breather. Mike likes to say it, throws it out about anyone and everyone that's a big Pain in the Ass. The word has sort of seeped its way into her vocabulary - like all the other words she's learned since leaving the surfer slang behind in California.

But Billy - he's left her alone ever since the Incident. Max knows it's because he's now the one afraid of her - funny how the tables turn. He doesn't want to lose his balls on a metal studded baseball bat, or that's what the Party says. Dustin, specifically, says that's the only reason he's being better, because "what's a boy without his pickle?"

But Max knows it's something else, too. Billy even apologized to Lucas, and Billy *never* apologizes to anyone. (Unless it's Neil, but Max doesn't like to think about that, because it makes her feel bad for Billy and she doesn't think he deserves that. Maybe. He is getting better.)

Max thinks it's because of Steve Harrington. That senior jock who Dustin worships. And Lucas, too, but he pretends he doesn't care

when Max giggles at him staring in adoration at Steve's stupid fluffy hair, whenever he comes to Mike's house or Will's house to watch over them when their parents are out. Max thinks he looks like a demented lion, and she tells him that often, and she ducks out of his way when he goes to ruffle her hair and say "you're the one with the red mane."

Dustin and Lucas are not alone in their worship of Steve Harrington. Max has caught Billy staring, too. Many times.

The first time is a week after that night, the Incident, when Billy barrels into the parking lot in front of the school. He's silent, staring out his window as he cuts the engine. The silence has become the new normal; he never says much to Max other than "pick you up at three". This morning, Max follows his gaze and sees Steve, climbing out of his Beamer, black Ray Bans crammed over his face, which is still bruised, backpack slung over his shoulder. Max might have imagined it, but she thinks she hears Billy sigh, a soft little sad sound that doesn't fit with Billy, not at all.

"What're you looking at?" Max demands.

Billy jumps, and that's not like him at all, either. She realizes this is the first time she's said anything to him all week.

"Nothing," he grumbles, banging open his door and climbing out.

Max follows.

"Thought you were staring at Steve," she says. Sirens go off in her head - don't egg him on - but she ignores them. She hasn't been afraid of Billy since the Incident. Plus, if she can face down demodogs in Mind Flayer tunnels, she can face her asswipe of a stepbrother.

"Well I wasn't," he snaps, slamming his door shut. Steve, as if on cue, passing by, looks up at the sound. He waves, smiling, at Max. She waves back enthusiastically, wanting to push Billy's buttons. There's an awkward pause, when Steve turns his shaded gaze to Billy, Billy who just stands frozen, his hand still on the door handle.

Then Steve says, “Hey, Hargrove” and gives a little finger wave before turning away and heading toward the school. Max watches in amazement as Billy’s cheeks go pink and his mouth falls open slightly. That’s odd.

“Not staring at all,” she snorts, and Billy spins around. He scowls at her.

“Shut it, Max.”

Mouth-breather, she thinks.

She grins wickedly. The gears in her mind are churning.

“See you at three!” She scampers off to the front doors before Billy can snap back.

The next few weeks Max watches Billy. In school, her locker only a dozen down from his, she watches and smirks when he stares down the hallway at Steve, who’s opening his locker and chatting away with Mike’s older sister. Nancy. Max doesn’t think Billy likes Nancy, from the expression he wears when she’s near Steve, an expression that looks like someone has shoved a dead demodog right under his nose. Which would be really funny, Max thinks, but also probably problematic, too.

When Billy comes to pick her up at the Arcade one day, she watches his reaction when Steve pulls up, to pick up Dustin, Lucas, and Will. She and the three boys are saying goodbye outside the Arcade, while Billy waits, leaning against his Camaro, back facing them, smoking a cigarette. Max watches his shoulders tense when Steve pulls up. He drops his cigarette when Steve hops out of his car. Max can practically hear Billy swear. She watches Billy fumbling, patting his pockets for his pack of cigs, which Max can see sitting on the dashboard. Steve waves to Billy, says something, grins. From twenty feet away Max can see Billy’s ears go red. Steve reaches into his front pocket of his baby blue polo, pulling out a slightly bent cigarette.

Billy takes it, and Max knows his hand is trembling.

Billy picks her up after the Snowball, and it's a mark of how much he's changed that when Lucas leans in to kiss Max goodbye, and she rushes over to the Camaro blushing, that Billy doesn't say anything about it, doesn't tease her, just nods at Lucas from the driver seat and actually leans over to open the passenger door for Max.

She slips into the car and buckles.

"How was it?" Billy asks, starting the car and leaning over to turn the heat up. Max stares at him. Was he actually trying to start a conversation with her?

"Good," she says slowly.

Billy nods, leaving it hanging. Max notices Steve walking towards the doors of the gym, here for Dustin. She knows Billy sees him, too, from the way his mouth is hanging slightly open and his eyes that follow Steve's movement, but she wants to test her theory.

"There's Steve," she says, and hides her grin behind her hand when Billy promptly shuts his mouth and speeds out of the parking lot.

Mouth-breather , she thinks.

One Friday night in early December Max wakes abruptly to the creak of her window opening, a gust of chilly night air, and the sound of a large someone falling into her room, swearing when they hit the hardwood floor. She sits up, rubbing her eyes.

"Billy?" she hisses.

He stands unsteadily, and from the moonlight streaming in through the curtains she can see him squint at her in confusion, his eyes glazed over, his stupid hair messy and snowy, his button up shirt hanging open.

“Max?”

“Yeah, dipshit.” She pulls her blankets up to her chin, shivering in the cold. “This is my room, after all.”

Billy blinks. He moves to close the window, trips over her skateboard, and just barely manages to stay up by grabbing the curtains. He rights himself and pulls the window closed.

“Are you drunk?” Max hisses, her nose wrinkling in disgust. With the window closed she can smell Billy: his stupid cologne, and a heavy scent of beer and sweat.

“Maybe a little.” Billy stumbles toward the bedroom door. The moonlight catches his face, and Max can see a strange red splotch on his neck. His cheeks are pink from the cold and he’s not scowling. He’s smiling, and Max thinks this is the first time she’s seen him genuinely happy. It’s an expression that doesn’t fit him, not at all. But it looks nice, she thinks.

“Sorry to wake you,” Billy whispers, closing the door on his way out. Max can hear him stumbling down the hall, hears his door creak open and the puff of the mattress as he flops down. She shakes her head, murmurs “mouth-breather”, and falls back asleep.

The thing that really catches her by surprise is noticing Steve stare at Billy, too. Sometimes he’s there in the school parking lot before them, leaning against his car, and when they pull up he gets this weird blush, when Billy steps out.

At AV club one day Max asks Dustin if Steve is dating anyone and Dustin laughs.

“He’s still in love with Nancy,” he says, while Mike and Will nod in agreement and Lucas asks her why she’s asking.

“Just wondering,” she shrugs.

The night before Christmas Eve Max goes to a party at the Byers' house. Billy drops her off (He ignores her when she points out Steve's car, grinning at him, and he speeds away as soon as she shuts the door). Everyone is there, everyone in their little end-of-the-world gang, including Hopper and Eleven. El actually likes Max now, which Max is grateful for. They eat too many cookies and exchange presents and everyone makes a lot of jokes about Christmas lights. Max doesn't understand but she doesn't ask because, though everyone has accepted her into the Party, even Mike, she knows there are some things she will never really be a part of. It hurts a little, but she ignores it. There are just some things that happened before her, and that's okay. She's here now.

Steve leaves early, laden with Christmas cookies from Joyce and an armful of presents. Nancy asks where he's off to so soon and he shrugs. Hopper asks him if he's got a hot date. Steve blushes and nearly drops everything, tripping over the welcome mat on his way out, but Max doesn't really have any time to think about this, as Mike and El have started trying to shove her and Lucas under a sprig of mistletoe hanging from the ceiling.

Max doesn't think anything's off when Billy doesn't come home one night in January - he's been known to do that. But she does worry, a little bit. Neil never likes it when Billy's late.

The next morning she hides in her room when the Camaro finally pulls in at 6 AM. She puts her hands over her ears when Neil comes down the hallway and there's a crash from Billy's room, the sound of her stepbrother being shoved against the wall and the sound of breaking glass. Max's eyes burn, and she shuts them tight and wonders how her mother can sleep through this.

They drive to school in the not so new normal silence, but this one is heavier. Billy has a bruise on his cheek and a cut under his eye. She knows there are more; she just can't see them. When she starts to say "I'm sorry" Billy just shakes his head and keeps his eyes on the road.

“Don’t be,” he says.

Steve’s there when they pull up, which is another new normal, and he seems to be expecting to see Billy’s face like this. Max follows them into school a little distance away and watches Steve put a hand on Billy’s back and lean in to say something she can’t hear.

Max knows what it is, she might even be in it herself, she thinks, and blushes furiously. She doesn’t say anything to Billy, or Steve, or Dustin or Will or Mike, or even Lucas. But she knows what it is.

She’s not surprised, therefore, when she leaves AV club early one day in the middle of February to find Billy’s Camaro there early, one car in the mostly empty lot waiting for her. But Billy’s not alone, she sees when she gets closer. Steve’s there, too, in the passenger seat.

He’s leaning over and Billy’s hand is gripping the back of Steve’s stupid hair, and Steve’s doing the same to Billy, and they’re sucking face like their lives depended on it. The windows are open so Max clears her throat loudly. They jump apart - and *really*, Max thinks, if they were trying to be discreet they might want to find a place with less foot traffic. Steve scrambles out of the car, mumbling, “hey Max” and dashing off.

She climbs into the now empty seat and raises her eyebrows at Billy, who’s breathing heavily, his hands gripping the steering wheel and his knuckles white.

“You’re early,” he chokes out.

“Mr. Clark had an appointment,” she shrugs.

She waits for the storm, knows it’s coming. She’s not afraid of it anymore, because Billy and his storm are always together, but they have found a new normal. The storm used to be shouting, banging things and breaking things and threats. But now it’s more like Billy’s a tea kettle, like his anger is about to boil over and his face goes red and sometimes he shouts, but something always turns the burner off

and he huffs, his body deflating like there's steam coming out of his nose.

"That - I - we weren't -" he starts, his face going red, boiling over.

"Sure looked like you were."

Billy sucks in a breath, closes his eyes.

Here comes the steam, Max thinks, and sure enough Billy lets out a deep sigh, his face going back to its normal shade.

"Just don't - don't tell anyone, ok? Not your little friends, not Susan, and not my dad, ok?" Billy hesitates, then looks at her, his eyes shining. Max thinks he looks scared. "Please, Max."

"You think I'd tell him?" She shakes her head. She doesn't want to think about that possibility, what *that* fight would sound like. "Don't worry, your secret's safe. Just one thing."

Billy snaps his head to look at her.

"Steve's cool." Max shrugs. "Don't fuck it up, ok, asshole?"

Billy smiles, not the wide, sharky grin, but a nice smile, like a real happy smile, the one he wore that night he fell into her bedroom, and the one he wears when he's with Steve. Max thinks Steve and Billy might be good together, maybe. They both have stupid hair.

"Deal. Brat."

Max punches him on the shoulder and he almost laughs, starting the car and cranking up the music. He steps on the gas.

Mouth-breather, she thinks, not without affection.